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Perfect Union

If there'd been no Civil War

A MORE PERFECT UNION. By Robert Stapp. Harper's Magazine Press. 375 pp. \$7.50.

By Edwin M. Yoder Jr.

This political melodrama is by "Mission Impossible" out of Ian Fleming with a nod to Huxley and Orwell — which is to say, almost pure fantasy. The year is 1981; the setting, nuclear crisis. "The Supreme Potentate of Ulandi [has] breached the unwritten code of good conduct by dropping a crude but serviceable atom bomb on the neighboring capital of Rfada." Nuclear disarmament has at last been negotiated, but before the treaty is put into effect the Confederate States of America plan a sneak atomic attack on the U.S.

We are to imagine, that is, that Lincoln evacuated Fort Sumter in 1861, letting the Rebs depart in peace. Now, very much wanting a corridor to the Pacific and a port city there, the C.S.A. are in the grip of a vaguely Mussolini-like dictator named Howie Spearman, charismatic Social Darwinian. President Lander of the good old truncated U.S. is advised that Spearman must be assassinated or fifty million innocents may die. To do the job the U.S. enlists Cordell Vance, Confederate émigré and one-time jungle fighter. The CIA makes the contact, which makes the novel, among other things, an orgy of wish-fulfillment for the conspiracy set. Vance is to go South and kill Spearman, but not, you may be sure, without innumerable 007-like complications and a girl or two.

That the political thriller must ruthlessly develop plot at the expense of character and plausibility renders a suspension of disbelief imperative from the outset, willing or not. The disbelief is sustained, however, by some of the most charmingly

maladroit prose since J. Morton Coogler. By comparison, indeed, the Washington novels of Allen Drury are of Tolstoyan subtlety. And yet *A More Perfect Union* is fun to read, if not always for the reasons intended.

In its world, cabinet members address each other in jocular vulgarities or in Victorian locutions that Ambassador Annenberg could not improve. As for the narrative, there can have been nothing quite like it since Mrs. Aphra Behn breathed her last. CIA chiefs and such wear "habitual expressions of lugubrious disdain" and everyone has a "leonine" head.

My favorite character is Diane Fleming, the gal Vance shacks up with in Chicago while agonizing over the mission. Diane, although attractive enough to the "eligible swains" of Fort Wayne, Indiana, has thrown over the *crème de la crème* of her home town for the University of Chicago, where she is studying "the unfamiliar facets of adulthood." Among them:

... pot, LSD and more esoteric drugs ... a short course in conventional sex ... dances, the theater, music festivals, one orgy in which she did not fully participate and several demonstrations against the establishment.

If the liberal arts are tottering, the plight of history is worse. In Stapp's reconstruction, the Confederacy has abolished slavery eight years after secession, but is otherwise credited with little political wisdom or even common sense. I suppose that it is gratuitous to wonder how the Confederacy, spared the blast of civil war, degenerated from Robert E. Lee (elected President in 1870) to a cad like Spearman. Or how it began with a dogma of state sovereignty and individualism so rigid that the real Confed-

eracy, according to historian David Donald, "died of democracy" but got to the Huxleyan beehive of "prives," "supeers," black cloisters and the like described here. A footnote: Florida has seceded from the Confederacy in 1925, gained recognition as a republic from Silent Cal Coolidge, but to this day (1981) "had never quite made up its mind whether it was a country or a country club." Same old Florida, if that's any consolation.

A More Perfect Union is, I say, fun to read and I shall not spoil any reader's fun by betraying the outcome. It lives, which is more than may be said of many a technically superior novel; and it purveys delights of unwitting self-parody.

Yet if Stapp and his editors are for real, I wonder where the poor old political novel is headed. Never very sound, it is here but a temporary husk for a sensibility formed by video clichés, wholly innocent of any suspicion that fiction has a discipline or a technique all its own. Even Drury's novels, shrill, apocalyptic and improbable as they are, have inklings of political reality and echoes of literary. But I suppose that *A More Perfect Union*, having sloughed the bondage of print, will be a spectacular movie. I can hardly wait to see the corpse shot from the mini-submarine belonging to the Smithsonian Institution.